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# VALUE CLARIFICATION VIA BASAL READERS

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"Now that we've read 'Hansel & Gretel,' I want you to do some thinking about some of the characters in the story," Mrs. Ross told her second graders one April morning. "Copy 'Father,' 'Step-mother,' & 'Witch' from the board. When you go back to your seats, I want you to think about which one of these was the most evil. Write 1 in front of the character you believe was the most evil and 3 by the one who was the least evil. Then write 2 by the other one. Be ready to tell us why you decided as you did."

The next day Mrs. Ross began asking, "How many decided the witch was the most evil? The father? The step-mother?" Then she let several students explain the basis for their decisions, making sure that each character's evilness was explained by at least one child who had ranked the character high and by another child who had ranked the same character low. Throughout it all, Mrs. Ross never disagreed with a child whose reasoning was weak or fallacious but merely asked another child his/her reasons for ranking this character the same way. However, when it appeared that a significant fact wouldn't get mentioned, she asked, "Which character was the only one who actually *did* something evil?"

"Now that we have heard all the reasons, *after* each name on your paper, write 1 & 3 to show whom you *now* believe is most evil and least evil." After a few seconds, she said, "Did anybody change their mind? Do you want to tell us why you changed, Carol?" Carol declined and Mrs. Ross ended the discussion by saying, "If you enjoyed this discussion, maybe we could do something like it again. Now take out your workbooks."

Mrs. Ross was helping her pupils to read and think critically by having them consciously think through what constitutes evilness, by having them thoughtfully weigh alternatives, and by permitting them to decide for themselves what they believe. Simultaneously she was also helping them to clarify their values and beliefs about goodness and evil. She had adapted, to a reading situation, the concept advocated by Raths, Harmin, and Simon in *Values & Teaching* (1978).

## *Critical Reading via Value Clarification*

Value clarification activities are designed to promote many of the same qualities usually associated with critical reading. They typically center on situations where people have an opportunity to decide between or among different possible choices. For example, which do you like best, lectures, discussions, or independent reading? Or, would you shoplift if you knew you wouldn't get caught?

Confronted with dilemmas such as these, values clarification activities attempt to have students discover and examine various alternatives, to weigh each thoughtfully, and to reflect on the consequences of each. This is also the height of critical reading. These are the same strategies that we want children to engage in while reading critically: Not to accept one answer or point of view but to generate and compare plausible choices and to judge them against some set of standards or criteria.

Teachers who, like Mrs. Ross, have adapted value clarification techniques to reading situations report several apparent changes in their pupils' reading and thinking. One, the pupils learn that there may be more than one "right" answer depending upon the point of view—the values—of the reader. When children choose differing answers to one question and then, to some degree, explain or justify their reasons, tolerance grows and diversity is respected.

Two, pupils seem better able to generate more than one alternative or point of view. "She could either say she found it or she could tell the truth and hope Ann wouldn't be angry." Narrowmindedness is decreased and multiple possibilities are encouraged. Such a classroom becomes more like the real world than the artificial one in most schools where the teacher's answer is the "correct" one.

On the other hand, justification and explanation sometimes seem not to grow perceptibly. This is probably because children are limited in their ability to articulate their reasoning, because they cannot adequately express their thoughts, rather than because they really don't become better able to judge their own and others' decisions. Aware teachers will accept "Just because" explanations, recognizing them as expressive language limitations rather than as inabilities in reasoning.

### *Clarifying Values*

But the benefits of this approach go far beyond learning to read critically. If applied to appropriate reading selections, children can also identify, sharpen, and deepen their values and beliefs.

One way to develop values is to project one's self into another's situation, to "walk in another's moccasins." Reading selections in which a character is confronted with several possible courses of action is ideal for helping children compare, weigh, and reflect upon which course is most desirable. While children are considering whether Beth and Amy should befriend their new neighbor, they are simultaneously developing some insights into problems associated with moving to a new location. They can increase their empathy for their own new neighbors and even conceptualize how they might act in such a situation. They are clarifying their values of what a neighbor is and does.

Many selections in basal readers lend themselves particularly well to the clarification of values because they focus on children in decision-making situations. Biskin and Hoskisson (1974) and Harris and Smith (1976) point out that teacher-directed reading instruction is uniquely suited to get

children to think about right and wrong, justice, respect for others and similar aspects of moral development.

Teachers concerned with the moral and values development of their students should take advantage of these ready-made opportunities in basal readers: Developing critical reading/thinking skills and personal values simultaneously.

The remainder of this article illustrates seven simple and practical suggestions, based upon techniques recommended by Rath, Harmin, and Simon (1978). These techniques are: (1) Agree-Disagree, (2) Role Playing, (3) Unfinished Sentences, (4) Rank Order, (5) Forced Choice, (6) Values Voting, and (7) The Value Sheet.

In general, these suggestions are viewed as alternatives to and substitutes for many discussion and written comprehension activities found in basal reader teacher's manuals; they aren't viewed as something else for the busy teacher to do in addition to the myriad suggestions provided in commercial materials.

The examples are based on selections from seven current basal series and range from grades 1 through 6 to illustrate that the techniques have wide applicability. Only two things are required for successful use: (1) a situation in which a character could have acted, thought, or felt differently, and (2) a teacher able to accept and respect student opinions that may be immature, wrong, or even *opposite* his/her cherished lifelong values.

### *Sample Value Clarification Exercises*

*Agree-Disagree* – “The Donkey Knows,” *Ups and Downs*, grade 1. (4)

One man pays another to ride along on his donkey. When they squabble over who will sit in the donkey's shade, the donkey bolts and runs away.

1. The Donkey Man was wrong to give the donkey some water. A DK D
2. The Walking Man had paid for the right to sit in the shade. A DK D
3. The Donkey Man should not have pushed the Walking Man. A DK D
4. Etc.

*Role-Playing* – “The Donkey Knows,” *Ups and Downs*, grade 1. (4)

Have the pupils dramatize the story and then have them think about:

What the man could have done with the water.

How else they could have handled sitting in the shade.

Then have them re-dramatize the story showing cooperation and thoughtfulness, not selfishness.

*Unfinished Sentences* – “A Left-Handed Surprise,” *Tricky Troll*, grade 2 (1)

Jim finds it isn't so bad being left-handed when he discovers his uncle, a professional baseball player, is also left-handed.

1. Jim shouldn't feel bad because . . .
2. Jim's mother should have . . .
3. Like Jim, I'm different from other children in that I . . .
4. Etc.

*Rank Order* — "Penny's Good Fortune," *Thundering Giants*, grade 3. (2)

As payment for working, Penny selects a treasure worth thousands of dollars. She decides to sell the statue and give 1/3 of the money to the store owner.

Mask the last paragraph on p. 176 and all of p. 177 and have children read to this point.

Have each child rank the following possibilities as to what they believe Penny should do. Discuss.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Return it to Mrs. Hobbs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sell it and keep the money.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sell it and give Mrs. Hobbs \$100.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sell it and give Mrs. Hobbs half the money.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Donate it to a museum.

*Forced Choice (Within a Selection)* "The New Bike," in *Dreams and Dragons*, grade 4. (6)

Nancy buys a tandem bike rather than a 10-speed one for her paper route so her blind friend Beth can ride along and help her.

1. Nancy's father was unwise to let her buy the tandem. Yes No
2. Nancy should have discussed the situation with Beth before buying the tandem. Yes No
3. Etc.

*Forced Choice (Among Selections)* — "Walking Alone and Together — Unit Five," *Person to Person*, grade 4. (7)

After reading a unit, have pupils respond to the following questions about selections in it. A discussion may follow.

1. Who do you think faced the biggest problem, "The Fastest Quitter in Town" or "Joey"?
2. Which did you think was most realistic, "Joey" or "Salt Boy"?
3. Which did you like best, "Delilah" or "Goldie, the Dollmaker"?
4. Which did you have to think about most to understand it, "Goldie, the Dollmaker" or "Salt Boy"?

*Values Voting* — "The Black Stallion and the Red Mare," *Moments*, grade 5. (3)

A stallion heads a band of wild horses which "steal" horses from surrounding farms. The farmers band together and capture the herd. The stallion stays with his blind mare rather than running to freedom.

"If you agree, raise your hand; if you disagree, turn thumbs down and if you are undecided, fold your arms."

1. Donald was wrong to tell his father where the wild horses were.
2. The stallion was dumb to stay with the mare and be caught.
3. Donald's father showed good judgment in letting the stallion and mare stay together in captivity.

*The Value Sheet* - "The Endless Steppe," *Racing Stripes*, grade 6. (5)

A 10-year-old girl and her family live in exile in a labor camp in Siberia in the 1940's. She and her grandmother take a few of the family's belongings to a village market to trade for food.

Have pupils write responses to the following questions. Then discuss in small groups or teacher can read responses anonymously and without comment.

1. If exiled to a labor camp, what five personal belongings (other than clothes) would you take with you?
2. Which would you be willing to trade for food as Esther did?
3. After being on a restricted diet for several weeks like Esther was, what are 2-3 kinds of food would you trade your belongings for?
4. Is it right for a whole family to be sent to a labor camp when only the father was "guilty"? Why or why not?

These are not the only selections in these books which lend themselves to these techniques; these were chosen merely to illustrate various possibilities. Readers intrigued by the possibilities of stimulating in-depth critical and creative thought via the values clarification approach are encouraged to read thoughtfully the selections in their own series and to adapt any of the above techniques they conclude fit the children they teach. But above all, readers are urged first to familiarize themselves with values clarification as described by Rath (1978), Simon (1972), or Vollmer (1977) because the role of the teacher is as important - possibly more so - than the activities themselves.

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